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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between media use and political activity in a sample of 380 Charlotte, North Carolina, registered voters. Although voters were interested in the campaign (particularly as it came to an end), they rarely engaged in political activities other than discussing politics and voting. Political activities measured included door-to-door campaigning, working for a candidate, contributing money, wearing a button or displaying a sticker, writing or phoning on behalf of a candidate, and attending a political rally. Voters were assessed on the basis of degree of use of television and newspaper as high-TV/high-newspaper users, high-TV/low-newspaper users, low-TV/high-newspaper users, and low-TV/low-newspaper users. The majority of voters reported high usage of both media, and those who made greatest use of these news media were more likely to engage in other political activities. These findings added support to the idea that use of mass media during a campaign is a form of political behavior. (Author/KS)

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Political Activity and Media Use

by

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Agenda-setting generally refers to the idea that day-by-day mass media provide a political agenda (topics and issues) for audience members to digest, ponder, discuss and adopt in the same way in which the media present them.¹ But one unexpected finding has been an "issue-sharing process" in which voters respond more to political issue saliences as a campaign proceeds and media and voters seem to reach an "agreement" on the issues.² If so, one could argue that media use is a kind of political behavior, the subject explored in this article.

Audience Involvement

On the surface, this agenda-setting process merely suggests a time lag between media response and voter response to a campaign issue(s). Beyond this, however, it suggests voters may be actively involved in selecting mass media content to meet certain needs or gratifications. That is, issue-sharing may be part of a political process in which a voter is motivated by certain felt political needs (for example, the desire to make a rational vote decision or the need to stay a notch ahead of friends on political issues), which mass media content at least partially fulfills. Such a "uses and gratifications" approach

takes the media consumer rather than the media message as its starting point, and explores his communication behavior in terms of his direct experience with the media . . . Furthermore, the uses and gratifications approach provides a broader perspective for the exploration of individual media behavior by tying it to the continuous search for the ways in which humans create and gratify needs.³

This idea of an active audience,⁴ in contrast to traditional political notions, usually couched in terms of persuasion or audience effects, allows the researcher to interpret much mass media consumption.

as a response to needs felt by the audience members, given psychological dispositions and social roles, the individual viewer, listener, or reader, experiences or expects to experience some form of need-satisfaction through his media use behaviors.⁵

Voters as Different Types of Media Users

One assumed need, examined in this article, is to be informed about political candidates and issues during a campaign. This need could grow out of and be influenced by various psychological motivations or dispositions such as partisan feelings, interest in the campaign, commitment or lack of commitment to candidate choice and general concern about who wins the election.

Method

To probe this need, data gathered from in a 1972 sample of registered Charlotte, North Carolina, voters were analyzed. The panel survey included an initial sample of 380 interviewed in June. Of these, 226 were reinterviewed both in October and in November (two days after the election). June and October interviews were personal interviews, while November interviews were conducted primarily by phone.

Registered voters were asked if they had actually voted during the November survey. When responses were checked against actual voting records, little false reporting emerged.

Since the sample was drawn from a computerized list of registered voters, it is impossible to establish the validity of the sample against the population as a whole. A primary reason for choosing Charlotte as a site for the study was its diversified racial and working-class population. This city is also located far enough away from other metropolitan areas to minimize the possibility of its voters being influenced by out-of-town media.

Media Use

Charlotte voters were asked in October how much they used newspapers "for news about political candidates and issues". The same question was used for television news. For analysis respondents were separated into four media-use categories:

1. High TV/High Newspapers: Those voters who reported they rely "some" or "a great deal" on both newspapers and television for political news.
2. High TV/Low Newspapers: Those voters who reported they rely "some" or "a great deal" on television but "very little" or "not at all" on newspapers for political information.
3. Low TV/High Newspapers: Those voters who reported they rely "some" or "a great deal" on newspapers but "very little" or "not at all" on television for political news.
4. Low TV/Low Newspapers: Those voters who reported they rely "very little" or "not at all" on both television and newspapers for political news.

Surprisingly, 155 or 68.6% of the panel voters fell into the first category of heavy media use. Because we were interested in changes over time, only those voters participating in all three waves were included. Thirty-five voters were classified as Low TV/High Newspapers, 21 as High TV/Low Newspapers and only 15 as Low TV/Low Newspapers. These small sample sizes naturally restricted the analysis and subsequent interpretations somewhat, but because the panel consisted of a random and presumably representative sample of Charlotte voters, we felt a further look was warranted.

Of particular interest were possible differences in political cognitions (attitudes and perceptions) and activities among the four groups. The relative amount of political content in newspapers is generally much higher than in television, but television news and political broadcasts often serve to supplement and enlighten print information.

For example, a voter obviously should read his daily newspaper for in-depth details of Presidential candidate speeches that day or the previous day. Television newscasts would offer only the highlights. But to find out (particularly over time) exactly how the candidates delivered such speeches (in terms of inflection, tone, personal appearance, gestures, etc.), a voter should obviously watch the television newscasts (if there is no opportunity to watch in person of course). This supplementary function of television is highly important but, from the point of view of issues, is supplementary to the traditional role of print media in providing details and depth.

Political Interest and Media Use: An Hypothesis

Generally one would expect voters who are most interested and active in political affairs to rely heavily on both television and newspapers for political information. The general hypothesis of this article is:

voter political activity and interest are positively associated with reliance on newspapers and television for political information, with the association most positive for high television/high newspaper use, followed by low television/high newspaper, high television/low newspaper and low television/low newspaper.

Underlying this hypothesis are two assumptions:

1. Newspapers are more politically informative (at least in terms of issue details) than are television news broadcasts, and
2. Politically active and interested voters want to be informed.⁶

Voter Concerns

How do the four types of voters differ in concerns during a campaign?⁷ Table 1 indicates the ranking of issues for each group in June and October. The issues of "Vietnam" and "Bread and Butter" were major issues for all voters.⁷ Except for the Low TV/High Newspapers group, "youth, drugs, morals" also was an important issue.

Table 1 About Here

The changes in concerns from June to October are particularly interesting. Vietnam increased in importance as an issue from June to October for High TV/High Newspapers and Low TV/Low Newspapers voters, but actually decreased within the other two groups. In October, Vietnam ranked first only among High TV/Low Newspapers voters.

"Bread and Butter," a major issue which increased in importance among all four groups from June to October, was the primary concern of all but High TV/High Newspapers voters in October.

Political Discussion

Charlotte voters were asked in June and October the extent to which they engaged in discussions about politics. One would expect an increase among all groups as the heat of the campaign progressed from June to October, and Table 2 reflects this.

Table 2 About Here

The data also confirm the hypothesis with the High TV/High Newspapers group engaging most in political discussions, followed by Low TV/High Newspapers, High TV/Low Newspapers and Low TV/Low Newspapers. This last group of voters was especially inactive with only slightly more than a quarter of them involved with political discussions during October, compared with sizeable majorities among the other three groups.

Political Preference

Support for President Nixon increased from June to October and then declined somewhat by the election within each category, as Table 3 illustrates.

Table 3 About Here

Senator McGovern on the other hand generally gained popularity, although never gaining more than one-third of the vote. Low TV/High Newspapers voters were the strongest Nixon backers (almost three-fourths of the November vote), while Low TV/Low Newspapers voters were most favorable toward McGovern (one-third of the vote).

Socioeconomic factors may play a role in these findings. Various studies have shown that heavy newspaper readers are generally upper middle-class, white-collar workers, who gave Nixon considerable support in the November election. Light media users, particularly of newspapers, have generally been found to be lower-class urban poor, many of whom supported McGovern. The Low TV/Low Newspapers group also contained the highest percentage of undecided voters in October--40%.

Voter Interest, Concern and Commitment

Tables 4, 5 and 6 explore three related variables--level of interest in the Presidential campaign in June, amount of concern in June about who wins the election and strength of commitment to candidate choice ("How strongly do you feel about your Presidential choice?").

Tables 4, 5 and 6 About Here

In support of the hypothesis, High TV/High Newspapers voters expressed the most interest in the campaign (98.7% indicated at least some interest), while Low TV/Low Newspapers voters were least interested in the campaign (although nearly three-fourths of them expressed at least some interest). The second most interested group was High TV/Low Newspapers, contrary to the hypothesis. However, differences between High TV/Low Newspapers and Low TV/High Newspapers were slight.

Differences between voter groups, except for Low TV/Low Newspapers, on general concern about who wins were minimal, with all voters expressing considerable concern. If we combine "some" and "high" interest, High TV/Low Newspapers voters were most concerned (97.2%), but only by a slight margin over the other two voter groups. See Table 5. Low TV/Low Newspapers voters, although still much concerned, were least interested in the campaign, with 6.7% expressing no concern.

Table 6 shows commitment to candidate choice increased substantially from June to October within all voter groups except for Low TV/Low Newspapers, where it actually declined. Contrary to the hypothesis, Low TV/High Newspapers voters were most strongly committed overall with over half indicating strong commitment in June and more than three-fourths in October. Only Low TV/Low Newspapers voters expressed relatively low commitment.

Political Activism

Of particular concern in this study were possible differences in political activism among the four voter groups. As Table 7 shows, only a minority of Charlotte voters engaged in formal political campaign activity except voting. Contributing money and attending a political rally were the most popular activities other than voting. High TV/High

Newspapers voters were generally the most politically active, although only a relative minority of this group did more than vote. (Nearly 90% voted.)

Table 7 About Here

However, High TV/Low Newspapers respondents were most active in door-to-door campaigning (9.5%) and contributing money (28.6%) and Low TV/High Newspapers voters most likely to wear a button or bumper sticker (25.7%).

As predicted, the Low TV/Low Newspapers group was least active. Only two-thirds of this small voter group voted in November and none campaigned door-to-door, wore a button or sticker or wrote or phoned anyone about a candidate. High TV/Low Newspapers and Low TV/High Newspapers members were about equally active (or inactive) politically.

Tables 8-11 provide correlational matrices for each of the groups as an indication of association among the various

Table 8, 9, 10 and 11 About Here

political activities.

Political discussion in June and October are rather positively associated with selected other political activities, especially among High TV/High Newspapers and High TV/Low Newspapers voters. For example, for both voter groups discussion of politics in June is significantly ($p < .05$) and positively correlated with campaign interest, discussion of politics in October, work for a political candidate, and attending a political rally. For the same groups, political discussion in October

is positively correlated ($p < .05$) with working for a candidate, wearing a button or sticker and attending a rally.

Except among the Low TV/Low Newspapers voters (where most responses were "no" to other political activities), selected political activities other than using the news media most often are positive in direction, several times reaching a level of statistical significance.

One would have expected party loyalty, campaign interest and other traditional variables to have been more highly correlated. In general the relationships were weak but less so for High TV/High Newspapers voters.

In Sum

Overall, Charlotte voters were interested in the campaign, particularly as came to an end, but only a minority engaged in political activities other than talking about politics and voting.

The majority of voters, however, did report high usage of both television news and the local newspapers. Those who made highest use of these news media also most often engaged in other political activities. This supports the idea that the use of mass media during a campaign may itself be thought of as political behavior. One may not read or view political information merely to learn about politics--though that certainly happens--but also to engage in politics.

Footnotes

1. Donald L. Shaw and Cynthia L. Long, "Voters and Issues: A Study of Media Agenda-Setting in the 1972 Campaign," Report prepared for the National Association of Broadcasters, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Journalism, January 1975.
2. Ibid.
3. Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, "Uses of Mass Communication by the Individual," in W. Phillips Davison and Frederick T.C. Yu, eds., Mass Communication Research: Major Issues and Future Directions (New York: Praeger, 1974), p. 12.
4. See Raymond A. Bauer, "The Obstinate Audience," American Psychologist, Vol. 19: 319-28, 1964, for particular insight into this idea.
5. Katz et al, Op. Cit., p. 15.
6. Group and interpersonal influences are assumed to be important but are not discussed in this chapter since the focus is on the mass media.
7. Voters were asked "What are you most concerned about these days?".
8. See Appendix for operational definitions of these issues.

APPENDIX

Operational Definitions of Political Issue Categories

Vietnam: Any comment dealing with combat action, Paris peace talks, POWs, war opposition (in US or abroad), statements of McGovern/Nixon on the war.

Personal-family: Any comment about purely personal problems.

Social problems: Any comment which, in a general way, relates to "social problems," "things in general," "problems of the little people."

Youth, drugs, morals: Any comment concerned with drugs, "busts," drug trials, drug-related crimes, drugs as a social and/or criminal problem, treatment for addicts. Also about "problems" with young people in general, including pre-marital sex, generation "gaps."

Bread and butter: Any comment about inflation, tax reform, congressional action or economic measures, including candidate's announcements regarding the state of the economy, taxes, or consumer affairs. Includes such personal comments as "cost of living," "hard to get by."

TABLE 1

A Comparison of Major Voter Concerns in June and October by Media Use for Political Information (Percentages in Parentheses)

High TV/High Newspapers (N=155)		High TV/Low Newspapers (N=21)		Low TV/High Newspapers (N=35)		Low TV/Low Newspapers (N=15)	
June	October	June	October	June	October	June	October
1. Social Problems (21.3)	1. Vietnam (24.5)	1. Bread-Butter (23.0)	1. Bread-Butter (28.6)	1. Vietnam (22.9)	1. Bread-Butter (22.9)	1. Bread-Butter (20.0)	1. Bread-Butter (40.0)
2. Vietnam (15.5)	2. Bread-Butter (20.0)	2. Vietnam (19.0)	2. Vietnam (14.3)	2. Bread-Butter (17.1)	2. Vietnam (14.3)	2. Youth, Drugs, Morals (20.0)	2. Youth, Drugs, Morals (13.3)
3. Bread-Butter (14.8)	3. Youth, Drugs, Morals (12.3)	3. Personal-Family (19.0)	3. Youth, Drugs, Morals (14.3)	3. Personal-Family (14.3)	3. Personal-Family (11.4)	3. Vietnam (6.7)	3. Vietnam (13.3)

TABLE 2

A Comparison of Political Discussion in June and October by Media Use for Political Information (Percentages)^a

	High TV/High Newspapers		High TV/Low Newspapers		Low TV/High Newspapers		Low TV/Low Newspapers	
	June	October	June	October	June	October	June	October
Never-								
Occasionally	46.4	28.4 (-18.0)	52.4	47.6 (-4.8)	65.7	34.3 (-31.4)	86.6	73.3 (-13.3)
Once, twice								
weekly-								
Almost								
daily	53.5	71.0 (+17.5)	47.6	52.4 (+4.8)	34.3	65.7 (+31.4)	6.7	26.7 (+20.0)

^aNote: Percentages in all tables that follow may not add to 100% since "no response" answers are included in calculations but not reported in tables.

TABLE 3

A Comparison of Political Preference in June, October and November by Media Use for Political Information (Percentages)

	June	Oct.	Nov.	June	Oct.	Nov.	June	Oct.	Nov.	June	Oct.	Nov.
Nixon	42.6	65.2	61.3	38.1	61.9	57.1	57.1	88.6	74.3	13.3	46.7	33.3
McGovern	5.2	16.1	18.7	14.3	19.0	19.0	2.9		5.7	0	6.7	33.3
Wallace	5.8			14.3			11.4			13.3		
Other**	43.2	1.3	20.0	33.4	9.6	23.9	28.6	11.4	20.0	73.3	6.7	33.4
Undecided		15.5			9.5						40.0	

*Net change from June to October in Parentheses.

**Includes undecided for June only and "no vote" in November.

TABLE 4

A Comparison of Levels of Interest in Presidential Campaign in June by Media Use for Political Information (Percentages)

	High TV/High Newspapers	High TV/Low Newspapers	Low TV/High Newspapers	Low TV/Low Newspapers
High Interest	71.6	57.1	52.4	26.7
Some Interest	27.1	37.1	38.1	46.7
Little or No Interest	.6	5.7	9.5	26.6

TABLE 5

A Comparison of General Concern about Presidential Winner
in June by Media Use for Political Information (Percentages)

Great deal	74.8	74.3	71.4	65.7
Somewhat	20.6	22.9	23.8	20.0
None	.6	2.9	0	6.7

TABLE 6

A Comparison of Commitment to Candidate Choice in
June and October by Media Use for Political Information (Percentages)

	June	October	June	October	June	October	June	October
Strong	33.5	52.9	34.3	51.4	52.4	76.2	46.7	13.3
Fair	20.6	21.9	20.0	25.7	4.8	14.3	0	20.0
Weak	5.2	8.4	8.6	11.4	0	0	6.7	13.3

TABLE 7

Comparisons of Various Political Activities by Media
Use for Political Information (Percentages of Those Who Did)

	<u>High TV/High Newspapers</u>	<u>High TV/Low Newspapers</u>	<u>Low TV/High Newspapers</u>	<u>Low TV/Low Newspapers</u>
Door-to-Door (Oct.)	4.5	9.5	2.9	0
Work for Candidate (Oct.)	11.6	9.5	8.6	6.7
Contribute Money (Oct.)	26.5	28.6	17.1	6.7
Wear Button or Sticker (Oct.)	18.1	19.0	25.7	0
Write or Phone (Oct.)	12.9	0	11.4	0
Attend Rally (Oct.)	22.6	14.3	17.1	6.7
Vote (Nov.)	89.0	81.0	85.7	66.7

TABLE 8

Correlation Matrix for Political Activities of
High TV/High Newspaper Respondents^a
(N=155)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
<u>June</u>													
1. Discuss Politics	1.00												
2. Party Loyalty	.01	1.00											
3. Campaign Interest	.32*	-.01	1.00										
4. Commitment	.04	.03	.10	1.00									
5. General Concern	.29*	.02	.46*	.20*	1.00								
<u>October</u>													
6. Discuss Politics	.35*	.00	.24*	-.10	.17**	1.00							
7. Commitment	-.03	-.05	.03	.10	.00	.10	1.00						
8. Door-to-Door	.06	-.15**	.10	-.04	.07	.12	-.05	1.00					
9. Worked	.22*	-.04	.11	.00	.07	.19*	.04	-.03	1.00				
10. Contributed	.12	.17**	-.10	-.02	.00	.12	.06	.09	.37*	1.00			
11. Worn Button	.17**	-.02	.06	-.15**	.02	.22*	.09	.01	.41*	.36*	1.00		
12. Telephoned	.22*	.00	.11	-.15**	.11	.35*	.09	.10	.22*	.27*	.21*	1.00	
13. Attend Rally	.14**	.09	.10	.00	.12	.14**	.02	.11	.41*	.51*	.31*	.31*	1.00

^aEntries are Spearman Rank-Order Correlation Coefficients.

*Statistically Significant from zero ($p < .01$).

**Statistically significant from zero ($p < .05$).

TABLE 9
Correlation Matrix for Political Activities of
High TV/Low Newspaper Respondents^a
(N=21)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
June													
1. Discuss Politics	1.00												
2. Party Loyalty	-.25	1.00											
3. Campaign Interest	.43**	-.05	1.00										
4. Commitment	-.27	-.04	-.08	1.00									
5. General Concern	-.04	.08	.17	-.10	1.00								
October													
6. Discuss Politics	.37**	-.01	.06	-.05	-.10	1.00							
7. Commitment	-.22	.08	-.26	-.12	.13	-.34	1.00						
8. Door-to-Door	.45**	.08	.30	.06	.14	.41**	.04	1.00					
9. Worked	.45**	.08	.30	.06	.14	.41**	.04	.99*	1.00				
10. Contributed	.48**	.16	.40**	-.08	.26	.49**	-.16	.51*	.51*	1.00			
11. Worn Button	.32	.12	.23	-.14	.20	.48**	.05	.67*	.67*	.50*	1.00		
12. Telephoned ^b	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.00	
13. Attend Rally	.54*	.05	.22	.06	.10	.59*	-.22	.71*	.71*	.61*	.61*	-	1.00

^aEntries are Spearman Rank-Order Correlation Coefficients.

^bValues cannot be computed since all responses were "no."

*Statistically significant from zero ($p < .01$).

**Statistically significant from zero ($p < .05$).

TABLE 10
Correlation Matrix for Political Activities of
Low TV/High Newspaper Respondents^a
(N=35)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
June													
1. Discuss Politics	1.00												
2. Party Loyalty	-.29**	1.00											
3. Campaign Interest	.21	-.34**	1.00										
4. Commitment	-.05	.19	-.11	1.00									
5. General Concern	.19	-.18	.43*	.32**	1.00								
October													
6. Discuss Politics	.27	-.37**	.21	.19	.37**	1.00							
7. Commitment	.02	-.04	.09	.04	.16	.19	1.00						
8. Door-to-Door	.19	-.12	.15	-.03	.10	.22	.08	1.00					
9. Worked	.01	.01	.07	-.15	.05	.14	.15	.56*	1.00				
10. Contributed	.26	-.31*	.25	.06	.27	.39*	.20	.38**	.40*	1.00			
11. Worn Button	.13	.05	.09	.02	-.01	.25	.05	.28**	.28**	.26	1.00		
12. Telephoned	.31**	-.24	.31**	.07	.21	.34**	.17	.48*	.53*	.55*	.01	1.00	
13. Attend Rally	.26	-.14	.10	.06	.10	.21	-.05	.38**	.67*	.60*	.26	.55*	1.00

^aEntries are Spearman Rank-Order Correlation Coefficients.

*Statistically significant from zero ($p < .01$).

**Statistically significant from zero ($p < .05$).

TABLE 11

Correlation Matrix for Political Activities of
Low TV/Low Newspaper Respondents^a
(N=15)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
June													
1. Discuss Politics	1.00												
2. Party Loyalty	-.61*	1.00											
3. Campaign Interest	.69*	-.29	1.00										
4. Commitment	-.18	-.10	-.20	1.00									
5. General Concern	.07	.08	.40	-.39	1.00								
October													
6. Discuss Politics	.08	.33	.00	.19	-.24	1.00							
7. Commitment	-.14	-.21	-.23	-.41	.09	-.13	1.00						
8. Door-to-Door ^b	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.00					
9. Worked	.10	-.07	.00	.36	.11	-.07	-.10	-	1.00				
10. Contributed	-.34	.39	.00	-.20	.11	.39	-.10	-	.07	1.00			
11. Worn Button ^b	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.00		
12. Telephoned ^b	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.00	
13. Attend Rally	-.34	.39	.00	-.20	.11	.39	-.10	-	-.07	.99*	-	-	1.00

^aEntries are Spearman Rank-Order Correlation Coefficients.

^bValues cannot be computed since all responses were "no."

*Statistically significant from zero ($p < .01$).

**Statistically significant from zero ($p < .05$).